

DISCUSSION PAPER 33

# Education in Ethiopia

## From Crisis to the Brink of Collapse

TEKESTE NEGASH

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*Indexing terms:*

Educational systems  
Educational crisis  
Languages of instruction  
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## Introduction: Context, scope

In most Sub-Saharan African states education (broadly defined as a system of learning from textbooks and carried out in large classes) is a phenomenon that has a strong colonial legacy. Mostly carried out by missionaries, education during the colonial times stressed some values at the expense of others. One of the highly privileged values was the acquisition of a foreign (European) language. In many aspects the record of colonialism in the field of education was dismal. There were far too few schools and students. The curriculum was impervious to local, national or regional specificities. Students in Makerere, Lagos and Accra studied the same subjects, whether they were literature, economics or political science. The situation was similar, but more pronounced in the French and Portuguese African colonies.

Imperial rulers were not initially keen to encourage widespread education for their colonial subjects. The extent of Imperial engagement depended on the length of the colonial rule and the resource base of the colony. To the extent Imperial rulers invested in education they did so in cooperation with the metropolitan religious institutions. It was only at the height of the Second World War and in anticipation of its aftermath that the British Imperial authorities in London began to pay attention to the issue of colonial education. In fairness, there were individual educators who wrote and campaigned for the introduction of what we nowadays would call best practices in Africa.<sup>1</sup> These voices were however quickly suppressed by neglect and shortage of resources. Moreover, these pioneer European educationalists were not engaged in the evolution of education that would be accepted and appreciated by the majority of the African citizens. They were rather developing educational programmes for an Africa that would develop in the best European footsteps.

On the eve of the independence of African colonies (1957–63), most colonies had their educational infrastructures in place. These were the medium of instruction and the curriculum to follow. Ethiopia, the major focus of this study, has not really been colonised. Many historians agree that the Italian colonial presence between 1935 and 1941 was too brief to be considered as a colonial presence. Yet the education system that the Ethiopian government implemented was very similar to those that prevailed in African states that were colonised for longer periods.

The task of the post-colonial African state was already defined. Its task was to build on and expand what already existed. The educational system that African

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1. See for instance, Gifford and Weiksel, 1971; Kay, 1972.



states inherited from the colonial times was, in fact, crisis-ridden, although this did not become apparent during the 1960s. The euphoria that accompanied the decolonization process gave little space to assess the scope of the threat. Furthermore, there was a widespread but unwarranted belief on the part of Europeans and North Americans that independent Africa would readily rectify the mismanagement of colonialism. One of the major instruments that African states were expected as well as encouraged to deploy was education. It was during the decolonisation process that the most powerful discourse, namely the discourse that argued for a causal link between education and national development, had a very privileged position. Developed by education economists such as Theodore Schultz and Foster, this discourse at times covertly and at times by implication argued for the introduction and perpetuation of Western values and curriculum.

The major focus of this paper is to contextualise the dilemmas of education in Africa in general and those of Ethiopia in particular. Its main purpose is to demonstrate that the crisis of education, despite phenomenal growth in enrolment, has deepened and the education system is in fact on the verge of collapse. Crisis and system collapse are interpretations of the actual state of the education system and of the extent to which its various components are organically linked. A major methodological tool for such interpretation is a discursive analysis of relevant episodes and instruments. Major political and ideological changes and their impact on education policy belong to the realm of episodes, whereas curricula, medium of instruction, resource base and views on the role of education constitute the key instruments. Discursive analysis is most often political as well as ideological. Hence discursive analysis as used by the founder of the concept (Michel Foucault) may be carried out within an established discourse. The dominant education discourse, for instance, emphasises the positive role of education on the overall development of society. Discursive analysis may also be carried out as a contribution to the evolution of a counter-discourse or simply as a further elaboration of the hegemonic discourse.

The context for this study is the widespread belief in Westernization through development aid largely managed by the so called development partners (i.e. donors and the World Bank). I concur with the views put forward by diverse authors such as Graham Hancock, Michael Maren and Alex De Waal that development aid runs the risk of sapping the initiative, creativity and enterprise of citizens of the aid receiving countries. Development aid has created, according to Graham Hancock, a moral tone in international affairs that denies the hard task of wealth creation and that substitutes easy handouts for the rigours of self-help. The demise of the cold war and the triumph of liberalism (with its magic formula of the free market as a solution to social, economic and political challenges) have further led to the marginalisation of Sub-Saharan Africa. The experiment with the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed on Africa since the 1980s made the gap between the rich world and Sub-Saharan Africa even wider. The internal market in Sub-Saharan Africa is too small

and most African countries (with few exceptions) have very little to export. The products that many African states could have produced for the European market are sealed off by high tariffs. The uncompetitive European agricultural sector is, for political reasons, kept afloat through massive subsidy. African voices which shout, "Do not give us aid; remove your subsidies" are drowned out by the combined interests of governments and international humanitarian organisations.<sup>2</sup> And the irony of it is that many European states are actively engaged in the destruction of African agriculture through the imposition of food aid on needy and famished countries. Ethiopia is one of the dumping grounds for solicited and unsolicited food aid.

Here it is worthwhile to note that the generosity of the rich countries reaches the starving Ethiopian in the form of a monthly supply of 12.5 kilograms of grains (wheat mainly) and at the best of times some decilitres of cooking oil all to the value of ca. five USD. It is quite easy to imagine the kind of a life which is saved by such meagre assistance from the rich to the poor. Five USD is an amount that is barely enough to keep a dog or cat for three days in Europe.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the ironies of our times that the more the rich world (Europe, North America and Japan) becomes richer, the more it is reluctant to recognise the injustices of extreme poverty.

Although a considerable portion of African governments' budgets is made up of development aid, it is inconceivable that this external financial input would lead to a sustained development. This is because the total volume of aid made available to African states is always too little and is tied to political conditions such as the democratization process that is compatible with those prevailing in the Western hemisphere. As conflicts driven by scarce resources and environmental degradation lead to civil wars, the response from the rich countries comes invariably late and in insufficient quantities. Moreover, the response from the rich world has since the 1990s assumed more of the nature of crisis management and food aid rather than long term engagement in the sustainable development of poor societies.

Sub-Saharan African states are increasingly left to the International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOS). This transition is very clear in the case of (Sida) Swedish International Development Cooperation. In successively dismantling its expertise and hence its active engagement Sweden has followed two strategies. The first is to operate under the myth of partnership, where aid receiving countries are given the funds to implement projects and programmes approved by Sweden. The second strategy is to channel more funds to the INGOS. In the short term both strategies may lead to the flow of resources from Sweden to Ethiopia but they can hardly lead to sustainable development since most of the projects are donor driven

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2. I concur with the arguments forcefully put forward on the negative and damaging role of international humanitarian and development organisations by Hancock, 1989; Maren, 1997; De Waal, 1997; Tvedt, 1998 and Suhrke, 2001.

3. According to my estimation there are about 40 million cats and 30 million dogs in Europe alone, and Sweden, my country, has about two million of them.

and are poorly linked to the views and perceptions of the target populations and subject to whimsical changes.

There is something that is fundamentally wrong in the relations between the rich and poor countries. This I believe has to do with the moral premises of development aid. On what moral basis do rich societies give aid to their fellows in poor societies? In a fully global market where everything is traded from everywhere to everywhere what is the responsibility of the rich towards the poor? And what are the implications of the persistent discourse on the primacy of human rights as regards to health, education and belief? What rights can the average Ethiopian claim in order to lead a life commensurate with human dignity?

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues; here it suffices to point out what I believe would be the major trajectories in dealing with such questions. A couple of years ago Peter Singer stressed that “those who have enough to spend on luxuries and yet fail to share even a tiny fraction of their income with the poor must bear some responsibility for the deaths they could have prevented”.<sup>4</sup> Many citizens of the rich world would easily refute such moral responsibility by arguing that they have institutions for development assistance in place thus absolving themselves of the moral quagmire. The Ministries for International Development of each rich state, with their heavily funded Public Relations Offices as well as the World Bank would in turn put the blame on the failures of the aid receiving countries or otherwise on structural obstacles emanating from the receiving countries. The rich world is doing what it can to assist the poor societies; it is up to the latter to bring themselves up. This attitude, which is by far the most dominant, would likely continue until it became clear that development aid as we have seen it being implemented would not enable poor societies like that of Ethiopia to come out of massive and worsening impoverishment.

I believe that the only sustainable way out of the vicious circle is the redefinition of human rights. I fully concur with the minority view that argues that a holistic application of human rights would oblige all states to ensure all human beings a standard of living commensurate with human dignity. Such an approach to human rights would involve a corresponding duty of redistribution of world resources.<sup>5</sup> The capacity of the rich societies to make the lives of all people in the world commensurate with human dignity is immense. A tiny fraction from the defence expenditures of the rich societies would wipe hunger from the surface of this world. Yet, it is worrying that the globalized economy made possible by advances in information and communication technology has led to the emergence of an extremely polarised and conflict-ridden world between the minority who bask in luxury and the majority who are daily deprived of basic needs such as clean water, functional food and shelter. Unless grounded on an equitable distribution of resources that ensures the

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4. Singer, 2002.

5. Fields, 2003.

basic needs of all individuals, a global system would have to rely on naked force for its survival.

It is within the above context that the Ethiopian state and society will have to confront the education sector. So long as the rich societies fail to evolve a more inclusive concept and praxis of relations that recognises the human rights of poor citizens, the Ethiopian state and society will have to make hard choices. There is little likelihood that the rich world will move towards a more equitable world system, if the readiness to identify all kinds of protest as terrorism and hence also the readiness to use weapons to quell them is something to go by. The policy of Westernising the Ethiopian society with the assistance of development aid will hardly lead to the development of a dynamic and sustainable education system. According to my reading of Deborah Bryceson and Leslie Bank's excellent synthesis the donor community and the international financial institutions have given up hope on most Sub-Saharan African states including Ethiopia. Moreover, African academics, (that ought to include Ethiopians as well) increasing involvement in consultancy work for Western donors has effectively undermined the building up of independent assessment of policy performance.<sup>6</sup>

The goal of this discursive analysis is to contribute to a shift in the discourse on the role of education in the survival of the Ethiopian political and cultural society. The key instrument in the evolution of a new counter-discourse is the role of indigenous languages at all stages of the education system. The persuasive value of discursive analysis is dependent on the experience and reading of the author as well as on the constellation of power holders such as professional organisations and political parties.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the education policies of the various regime types that have prevailed in Ethiopia since the Second World War. The second part describes as well attempts to explain the deepening of the crises of the education system and its virtual collapse. The final part discusses the importance of privileging indigenous languages as the medium of instruction all the way up to university level.

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6. Bryceson and Bank, 2001.

## I. Education and Development in Ethiopia: The history of dubious correlation

Since the 1940s Ethiopia has experienced three systems of political governance, each distinguished by its education policy. The first system of governance was the Imperial system that started soon after WWII and lasted until 1974; the second was the military/socialist system that lasted until 1991. The third and current federal system of governance became fully operational after 1994. In this section I shall briefly describe the salient aspects of the educational policies of the different systems of governance as they bear a great deal of importance for the future trajectories of the education sector.

### Education policy of the Imperial system of governance, 1941–74

The golden age of modern education in Ethiopia is usually dated to the years between 1941 and 1970.<sup>7</sup> The education sector with his late majesty the Emperor as frontline minister was by far the best staffed and financed. With the Emperor at the helm of power the Ethiopian government believed strongly in the centrality of education as a vehicle of progress. It is debatable what the Emperor meant by education and progress but his numerous statements on the subject indicate that modern education was to enrich Ethiopian civilisation.

The beneficiaries of modern education were those who were born from the mid-1930s until the end of the 1940s. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s there were far too many schools for students; and incentives such as clothing, school materials and boarding were quite common. Brilliant students were enticed to join vocational secondary schools (such as agriculture, laboratory science and teacher training) through free food and lodging. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the University College at Addis Ababa had to compete for students with the various vocational and technical secondary schools. Jobs were plentiful and salaries were closely tied to academic qualifications. During this period the returns to investment in education were clear to understand. After just a few years of education, children from humble backgrounds found themselves in high positions with an income that could have been more than ten times the per capita income of their parents. Education was

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7. For a brief historical outline of the history of modern education, see Negash, 1990.

free and it appealed more to the poorer section of the population; the rich and the aristocracy were less enticed by the economic returns of education.

The Emperor and his government might have believed that they were laying down the foundations for the modernisation of the country but they did not pay enough attention to the communication gaps between the generations that modern schools were creating. In practice, the Ethiopian government had no coherent strategy. The curriculum was ad hoc and left to teachers who came from different countries with different backgrounds. The first primers for primary schools in the official language of the country were first developed in 1955, nearly 15 years after the demise of Italian colonial occupation. As early as 1958 one of the pioneers in Ethiopian education pointed out that the curriculum in place was incapable of producing citizens who had the capability to interpret, enrich and adapt the heritage of the country to new needs and to changing conditions. The curriculum might have been irrelevant but all those who went through the system could still count on finding public employment with good remuneration.

Between 1941 and 1970 the Ethiopian education sector was undoubtedly influenced by two major ideas about what education is good for. The first one was the Emperor's conviction that modern education, preferably carried out by Lutheran missionaries, was an excellent strategy to educate and train citizens who respected their king, country and religion. The modernisation process that the Emperor came to lead needed a considerable amount of young people to staff the growing sector of the state apparatus. Ethiopia's growing integration with the Western world in general and the African continent in particular was an additional factor that encouraged the growth of the modern school in the urban and semi-urban areas of the country. The Emperor spoke on the role of education in the context of Ethiopian civilisation. The subject of moral studies (that included civics and religion) was an important component. Moreover, with the exception of one technical school, the rest of the schools offered only academic programmes. In the academic year of 1961/2 there were a total of 225,435 students in all primary schools in the country. The total number of secondary school students was 8,695. And the only University College in Addis Ababa had a total number of 950 students 39 of whom were female students.<sup>8</sup> By 1970 Ethiopia had an estimated population of about 30 million. Total enrolment was in the range of 1.1 million students out of a cohort of over ten million. The secondary school population amounted to four per cent of the age cohort out of which about 25 per cent were unemployed.

The second idea that shaped the Ethiopian education sector was that put forward by UNESCO on the role of education in the economic development of a state. Although advocated by UNESCO, the basis for the argument was largely derived from the pioneering study carried out by Theodore Schultz. A towering figure in

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8. UNESCO, 1966:448–450.

the field of the economics of education, Schultz wrote and campaigned for investment in human capital via the promotion and eventual expansion of the education system.<sup>9</sup>

The empirical research that Schultz undertook in the USA showed a direct link between investment in education and increase in income both at the individual and at the collective level. Schultz demonstrated that it was because the American working population had invested in education and health that the national income could rise so dramatically between 1930 and 1950. Schultz went on and argued that up to 50 per cent of the rise in earnings could be explained by the returns on educational investments. The tone of optimism in which Schultz wrote his papers and his overflowing confidence on the direct role of education for development, led to serious distortions and misconceptions of what can be achieved by education. At any rate, the writings of Schultz, coming during the eventful decade of decolonisation, were soon adopted by international agencies such as UNESCO. I have argued elsewhere that Schultz's research is not applicable in developing countries like Ethiopia. For a start, Schultz did not take into account the role of economic growth for education. It is only when the economy is growing that investment in education can lead to returns in terms of higher income for the individual investor and consequently an increase in national income. In stagnating or stagnant economies returns on educational investment can actually be negative as a growing number of unemployed and unemployable secondary school graduates can testify.

Moreover, for Schultz education was essentially the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills that enables those who acquire it to organise their lives in a qualitatively superior manner. Such understanding involves that what is taught is appropriate and relevant. The education system that operated in Ethiopia during the 1941–1970 era was geared to the production of academic who could best be entrusted with clerical tasks. That the curriculum of Ethiopian schools was highly irrelevant to the historical experience and current socio-economic situation of the country was pointed out as early as 1958. The Ethiopian experience indicated that certain conditions had to be fulfilled before education could be considered as a human capital investment with a good return.

Since Schultz's seminal study, the debate on the links between education and development continued for over 20 years. Schultz and UNESCO continued to propound a direct link between investment in human capital and development of a society. These arguments were highly appealing to countries who had just recently freed themselves from colonial rule. Colonialism, as it was explained in the 1960s and 1970s, paid far too little attention to the educational needs of its subjects. Schultz's hypothesis on education as a powerful vehicle for economic development became widely known in the early 1960s when most African societies were in the

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9. Schultz, 1961.



process of gaining their independence. A series of studies that stressed the role of African educational systems as developers and mobilizers of human capital for the modern sector of the economy were produced throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>10</sup> There was, however, a sharp division of opinion as to how much education was needed to produce an impact on the development of a society. Most of education economists appeared to stress secondary and higher education as decisive factors for development, whereas sociologists of education focus on primary education. Partly as a consequence of the theories on the role of modern education, African educational systems in general, and also the Ethiopian educational system, grew at phenomenal rates. It was only in the mid-1980s that a sort of consensus was reached whereby education began to be seen as one of several variables needed for successful and sustainable development within the context of a state.

The golden age when education was a profitable investment came to an end towards the end of the 1960s. The public sector could no longer absorb secondary school graduates produced by a continuously growing number of schools. As early as 1973, up to 25 per cent of the secondary school graduates were unemployed. At the time when so many secondary school graduates were roaming the streets of Addis Ababa and other towns in search of white collar employment, the country had a gross school enrolment rate of about ten per cent. Thus one of the most paradoxical situations in Ethiopia's modernisation history was the huge level of unemployment among the young and educated when the country was virtually illiterate. The paradox becomes clear when one takes into account that the level of literacy was not more than ten per cent of the cohort population. Total enrolment in both primary and secondary sectors increased from 35,000 in 1946 to 95,000 in 1955. In the 1962–63 academic year there were about 8000 students enrolled in grade 8, whereas total enrolment in grades 9–12 of public and private schools was 9,940.<sup>11</sup> In the same year, enrolment in grades 1–8 reached 304,138. Ten years later (1974) total enrolment reached 1.1 million.

The education system that prevailed in the country from the 1940s until the end of the 1960s could be described as an elitist system in so far as it reached some of the urban and even less of the rural population. It could also be described as a very generous public benefit delivered free of cost to those who lived close enough to access it. Moreover, although we lack good empirical documentation, the main beneficiaries of education were not the children of the ruling elite but those coming from ordinary and poor households. Households whose destiny brought them to cities and towns benefited from the coming of the school compared to their rural cousins. The modern school, especially the secondary school was and still remains an urban phenomenon. Yet in view of the considerable unemployment among the

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10. Harbison, 1971.

11. Mulugeta Wodajo, 1963/4. [I was one of those 8000 students enrolled in grade 8.]



educated, one could hardly sustain the argument that the Ethiopia education system was elitist.

Historians of Ethiopian education will certainly raise a number of questions as to the policy making capacity of the Ethiopian Imperial government until it was overthrown in 1974. Meanwhile, it is possible to argue that ever since the late 1950s, UNESCO, the World Bank and USAID were major partners in the planning of Ethiopian education. It may be debated as to which one of these partners had more power and influence, although it might turn out that UNESCO had the upper hand. One of the most persuasive messages that UNESCO preached in all the developing world was the role of education in economic development. Making full use of the seminal studies of Theodore Schultz, F. Harbison and others on investment in human capital, UNESCO showed the way to how countries like Ethiopia could expand their educational system.

The first such effort was the Addis Ababa Conference on African Education held in 1961 where all African states participated. One of the resolutions of the Conference was the commitment of African states to achieving universal primary education by 1980. By the end of the 1960s, however, the Ethiopian government and its partners (mainly the World Bank) realised that the sector was experiencing a delicate crisis. The education sector was producing far too many secondary school graduates who could not be easily absorbed by the modern economy. At the same time the great majority of Ethiopian school age children had no access to primary education. Universal primary education by 1980 was a goal that soon proved to be highly unrealistic.

The problem of widespread illiteracy and the anomalous situation of secondary school graduates roaming the streets in search of employment called for a series of education sector reviews. The modern economic sector was too small to accommodate the growing pool of secondary school graduates. There was a widespread dissatisfaction with the education sector from secondary school students who depicted the future in bleak terms. The conservative elements of the Ethiopian church and nobility argued that there was very little Ethiopian in the curriculum and that those young Ethiopians who passed through the school system were disrespectful of their society and its institutions. From abroad there was also a growing dissatisfaction at Ethiopia's lagging performance in its effort to achieve universal primary education.

The first Ethiopian education sector review took place in 1971–2 and was made up of an international group of experts. Its main mandate was to devise strategies for spreading universal primary education while at the same time resolving the acute problem of unemployment among secondary school graduates.

The first task of the Ethiopian education sector review of 1971–2 was to control the entry to secondary education. Fully cognisant of the social upheaval that unemployed secondary school graduates were capable of, the planners of Ethiopian education reasoned that secondary education need not grow beyond the natural

population increase, estimated at 2.1 per cent per annum. Throughout the 1960s, the number of secondary school students has been growing at the rate of 12 per cent per annum. As I pointed out earlier, although only four per cent of the appropriate age group attended secondary education, the wish of the Ethiopian government to try to think in terms of supply and demand was, in fact, highly commendable. The implementation of the sector review would have gone a long way in solving the problem of unemployed secondary school graduates.

The second task of the 1971–2 education sector review was to make the rural population the main target of its educational policy. The slow pace in spreading education into the rural areas was deplored both by the Ethiopian government and its partners. The year 2000 was set as the year when Ethiopia would extend universal primary education to all its citizens. The experts who framed the sector review (51 Ethiopians and 31 international experts) opined that it was the right of all citizens to get basic primary education of a minimum of four years. The recommendations of the Education Sector Review of 1971–2 would have had far reaching implications had they been implemented. It is interesting to note that there are great similarities between the 1971–2 sector review and the education policy of 1994 that is currently in use. But to this I shall return below.

Here it is important to note that the quality of teaching was far better during the Imperial system of governance than what came to prevail in the succeeding years. At the secondary level for instance most of the teachers were native speakers of English and the pupil-teacher ratio was below 40:1. It is another matter whether the subjects, especially those dealing with the human and social sciences were responsive to the history and culture of Ethiopia, which they were not. It is also important to note that most of those who currently hold political power received their training during the Imperial era.

The 1971–2 education sector review was made public at the time when the Imperial system was internationally accused of denying the existence of a serious famine in the northern parts of the country that might have killed more than 100,000 people. There were several other factors as well that contributed to a social and political upheaval. The consequences of a sharp increase in the price of fuel on the cost of living; the dissatisfaction of a growing number of soldiers with how the government managed the secessionist rebellion in Eritrea; the highly politicised university students who assumed the role of the opposition; and the pool of unemployed secondary school graduates all combined to bring a total defeat of the system of government that had for centuries operated in the country. Moreover, the opposition of teachers and secondary students was widespread; these two groups had nothing to gain from a policy that favoured the countryside over the urban landscape. The Imperial system was abolished in 1974 and with it also went the new education policy that had been worked out by the education sector review.

### The socialist system of governance and its education policy, 1974–91

The Ethiopian political system that prevailed in the country between 1974 and 1991 was the complete antithesis of the Imperial one. Ethiopia was declared a republic and ruled by a socialist/communist workers party. The economy was socialised; urban and rural lands were put under state control. The path of scientific socialism was deemed the most appropriate strategy to bring the country out of its backward stage of development. The Cold War was indeed a decisive context which made possible the transition from the pro-West alliance of the Imperial system to that supported and protected by the Soviet Union. Buttressed by the ideological position of the Soviet Union and its East European allies, the Ethiopian government began to put more emphasis on the role of education for development. Socialist education stressed the inculcation of ideology as a prime objective with Marxism and the value of production as the main pillars. The United States of America, one of the main partners in the development of the Ethiopian education sector, was replaced by educational experts from Eastern Germany.

The disruption of relations with the Western World in general and the United States in particular signalled the decline of English as a medium of instruction. At the height of the US-Ethiopian cultural relations there were up to 400 Peace Corps teachers from the United States in Ethiopia. The entire Ethiopian society was now in one way or another subjected to political indoctrination. The political economy of Marxism/Leninism was made a subject at all levels of the education system.

The socialist regime had no difficulties in criticizing the poor performance of the Imperial system in the field of education. Ethiopia was depicted as the poorest country in the world and this poverty was allegedly brought about by the Imperial (feudal) system of rule. The educational policy of the Imperial system was simply dismissed as elitist and academic. The new leaders, who soon proclaimed a republic, promised that they would transform the economy and hence pull the country out of its poverty. In this framework, the education sector was assigned a key role. The fundamental aim of education, as expressed by the Ethiopian government in the early 1980s, was to cultivate Marxist-Leninist ideology in the young generation, to develop knowledge in science and technology, and to integrate and coordinate research with production so as to enable the revolution to move forward and secure productive citizens.<sup>12</sup>

A new curriculum was duly produced where five new subjects namely, agriculture, production technology, political education, home economics and introduction to business were added. This meant that Ethiopian secondary students had to follow 12 subjects. This was in sharp contrast to the format of the curriculum of the Imperial period where students followed not more than seven subjects. The inclusion of additional subjects without prior planning and adequate

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12. Cf. Negash, 1990:20.

**Table 1. Enrolment**

| Academic year | Primary (grades 1–8) | Secondary (grades 9–12) | Higher (post-secondary) |
|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1956/7        | 135,467              | 4,845                   | 466                     |
| 1974/5        | 1,042,900            | 81,000                  | 6,474 (1973/4)          |
| 1990/91       | 3,926,700            | 454,000                 | 18,000                  |
| 2002/03       | 8,743,265            | 627,000                 | 147,954                 |

Sources: UNESCO, 1961; World Bank, 2004; Negash, 1990; McNab, Teshome Wagaw, 1990:167.

**Enrolment in Public and Private Colleges and Universities, 2002/03**

|                      |                       |                        |
|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Public institutions  | 90,687 male students  | 21,685 female students |
| Private institutions | 20,828 male students  | 14,574 female students |
| Total                | 111,685 male students | 36,269 female students |

Source: Ministry of Education: Education Statistics Annual Abstract, for 2002/03.

infrastructure led to the further deterioration of pedagogical conditions. The actual state of the Ethiopian education sector during the socialist-communist epoch of Ethiopian current history is narrated in the small study I published in 1990.

The socialist regime inherited a sector with structural distortions where a considerable portion of secondary school graduates faced unemployment. During the first few years of power, the socialist regime gathered together all new and old secondary school students and sent them to the countryside to preach to the peasantry the gospel of the new socialist revolution. With a stroke of the pen the new leaders solved, at least for the moment, the crisis of that sub-sector. Moreover, the new leaders continued to expand the education sector so as to prove the old regime wrong. At the risk of sounding too Malthusian, the reign of terror (the war between the government and armed opposition and where more than 60,000 young people may have been killed)<sup>13</sup> might in some way be related to the existence of unemployed educated youth in the country.

Between 1975 and 1989, enrolment grew at a rate of 12 per cent thus covering about 35 per cent of the 7–16 year-old school-age cohort. Table 1 demonstrates the rate of growth during the two periods. Expansion of the education sector was, however, not accompanied by a comparable increase in resources. On the contrary, the socialist regime intensified the use of the shift system (where students follow all their studies either in the morning or in the afternoon) so as to maximise the utilization of school premises. The shift system which began towards the end of the 1960s became a permanent feature during the 1974–91 period. While enrolment continued to grow at the rate of 12 per cent per annum, the government intensified

13. Cf. Wolde Giorgis, 1989 and Lefort, 1981.

the recruitment of Ethiopian teachers to fill the gap left by expatriates, especially at the secondary schools.

By the mid-1980s, the socialist government could no longer ignore the widespread public dissatisfaction with the quality of education. But as is often the case, the government and the bureaucrats within the Ministry of Education and the amorphous public had different understandings. For the government quality issues meant that the content “must fully prepare the students to meet the objective demands of the nation and the ideological needs of our society”. These needs and demands were to be fulfilled by “the implementation without delay of the programme for expansion of technical and vocational education in line with the manpower demands of the country”.<sup>14</sup> For the officials of the Ministry of Education, teachers and university employees, the decline in quality was discussed in terms of the growing pupil-teacher and pupil-section ratios as well as by the decline of the proficiency of teachers in the use of English as medium of instruction. The educational system of the Imperial period might have lacked relevance, but as Christopher Clapham noted “a fairly good education for a relatively small number of children had under the socialist regime been transformed into quite a poor education for a much larger number of children” (Clapham, 1990 quoted in Poluha, 2004:182).

Yet the manpower demands of the country for people trained in technical and vocational education remained extremely modest. The labour force of the industrial sector increased from 63,000 to 80,000 between 1978 and 1984 or at the rate of 2,430 new workers per year.<sup>15</sup> The private sector that could have absorbed educated labour continued to grow at a snail’s pace. As late as 1990, the entire manufacturing sector (or modern sector) of the Ethiopian economy employed not more than 100,000 people out of a labour force of about 30 million.<sup>16</sup> Ethiopia was rural at the end of the 1960s and still remains rural with an estimated 85 per cent of the population firmly engaged in agriculture in the year 2004.

In 1983, the socialist government commissioned an evaluation of the education system with a view to devising strategies for the “implementation without delay of the objectives of education”.<sup>17</sup> The evaluating commission, financed heavily by UNICEF, World Bank and the Swedish International Development Authority summed up its work by the end of 1985.<sup>18</sup> I have discussed elsewhere at great length the findings of the evaluating committee. Here it is sufficient to mention that the Ethiopian

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14. Negash, 1990:18.

15. International Labour Organisation, 1986:21.

16. Negash, 1996.

17. See Negash, 1990:18–20.

18. The evaluation committee was divided into four panels: i) curriculum development and teaching-learning process; ii) educational administration, structure and planning; iii) educational logistics, supportive services and manpower training; and iv), educational evaluation and research. The evaluation committee produced ten volumes, all of them in Amharic. All these findings were summarised in English in 1986. See, Ministry of Education, 1986.

government hardly benefited from it. It is most probable that the evaluation committee failed to attempt to answer the shortcomings of the sector as perceived by the government. It is also possible that the committee perceived the decline in quality as of a largely technical nature that could be resolved with the infusion of additional funds geared to the upgrading of teacher competence in teaching methodology and subject matter. By the end of the 1980s, although the socialist government remained committed to its own brand of ideology on the aims of education, the instruments it used to create socialist citizens were extremely inadequate. At the time I had the opportunity to carry out a study on Ethiopian education in 1988 I could observe that the sector was in a crisis created by a misconceived policy on the role of education in the development of a society.

Although the rate of expansion of the education sector was uniform from the 1960s until towards the end of the 1980s, such expansion was carried out at the expense of the teaching and learning environment. Very few resources were made available for the recruitment of sufficient teachers so as to keep the pupil-teacher ratio in the range of 40 to 1. Even fewer resources were made available to acquire and develop pedagogical materials; most of the budget for education went to salaries. The non-salary component became even less during the socialist regime. The curriculum department, heavily dominated by expertise from East Germany did what it could to develop text books designed "to meet the objective demands of the nation and the ideological needs of our society". The curriculum was permeated with ideological texts as well as texts on agriculture and on the primacy of technology.

The progressive withdrawal of English-speaking teachers and the overcrowding of classes, led to the decline of language proficiency among teachers and students. By 1980 the Ministry of Education toyed with the idea of replacing English with Amharic for junior secondary (grades 7 and 8). The problem of medium of instruction was also confronted by the Evaluation Committee of 1983. The evaluation committee advised the government to study the issue further within the context of a new language policy. By 1990, one could say that English had effectively ceased to be the language of instruction, although it remained as the language of text books for all subjects for junior and senior secondary education.

The socialist government worked under the lie that education was the key instrument to inculcate Marxist-Leninist ideology and to produce productive citizens. It portrayed itself as a regime that had done more to spread the benefits of education compared to the Imperial rule that it replaced. It is of course doubtful whether the socialist regime achieved any of its objectives. Education might indeed be considered as one of the areas of priority but throughout the 1980s, there were other areas that siphoned off more and more resources. The civil war in northern Ethiopia and the difficult political situation in the Western and Eastern parts of the country had to be financed by tightened budgets and compulsory contributions from Ethiopians in all walks of life. More than fifty per cent of recurrent budget was committed to

the defence of the country, and there was little money left for other sectors of the economy. Fortunately for the socialist regime, the Swedish assistance to the education sector continued unabated and Sweden was by far the biggest donor. The development of primary education in the rural areas that took off soon after the demise of the Imperial system was made possible by the targeted flow of Swedish funds. From 1975 until 1990, more than fifty per cent of all schools built in Ethiopia were partially financed by Sweden.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the education sector as a whole functioned in an environment that was hardly conducive to either teaching or learning.

Although there might have been a broad consensus as to the shortcomings of the education sector, opinions were divided as to the implications of the crisis. The education evaluation committee had for instance concluded its massive survey by identifying the bottlenecks in terms of resources and training. Others argued on the long term negative impact of an educational system that ignores the inculcation of values that keep a nation/polity/society cohesive and forward looking.<sup>20</sup> While donors like UNESCO and SIDA were positively impressed by the consistent literacy campaigns, and the spread of primary education from about ten per cent of the age cohort to about 35 per cent by 1989 achieved by the Ethiopian government, the question remained as to the implications of the spread or expansion of education on poverty in general and the alleviation of poverty in particular. For the great majority of the Ethiopian population socialism is associated with the spreading of the equality of poverty. The replacement of the private sector by state institutions made everyone, with the exception of high political functionaries, uniformly poor. In 1991 the socialist system of governance was defeated by the regional/ethnic armed insurgents.

#### The federal system of governance (functional since 1991)

The ruling political cum military party (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF) that came to power in 1991 reconfigured Ethiopia as a federal state. According to the constitution that came into effect in 1994, Ethiopia is composed of nations and nationalities that freely and voluntarily adhere to it. All member nations have the right to opt out of the federation. At present Ethiopia is made up of nine federal states and two chartered cities. A new era dawned on Ethiopia – that of the federal system of governance equipped with an appropriate educational policy that became operational in 1994. The educational policy of the new government is thus the third policy in the history of the country since 1945. The major feature of the new educational policy that became operational in 1994 is the introduction of ethnic languages as mediums of education for primary education. Overnight more than a dozen languages were deemed fit to function as mediums

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19. Negash, 1996.

20. See Negash, 1990:72–83.



of instruction. A similar feature related to the language issue is the choice by the Oromo Liberation organisations for the Latin script (to write the Oromo language) instead of the Geez script used to write Tigrinya and Amharinya. Since 1994, Ethiopia has according to its constitution no official language; Amharic and English are considered as working languages.

The landscape of Ethiopian education has changed dramatically since 1994. The gross enrolment ratio increased from ca 35 per cent in 1990 to 70 per cent in 2004. The Ethiopian government in general and the Ministry of Education in particular have been extremely efficient in mobilising external funds (bilateral and multilateral) for the expansion of the education sector. Most of the expansion is financed by the growing flow of foreign aid and loans as well by a growing contribution from the communities. However, the area of education where growth has been most dramatic is the tertiary sector. Enrolment in all sectors of higher education (diploma, undergraduate and post-graduate) increased from 18,000 in 1991 to 147,000 in 2003. This rate of increase is indeed impressive by any count. What has been even more impressive is the growth of the private sector in the provision of higher education.

In 1996 I attempted to argue that the state ought to leave the formal education sector in the urban areas to the private sector. The underlying argument was that there were enough households who would and could finance private schools for their children. It is worthwhile to note that I was referring to the primary and secondary sectors. I did not imagine that the private sector could be an important partner in the development of higher education. In 1996 there were very few private schools in the country and none of them were involved in higher education. By 2004, however, more than 35,000 students were following their studies at the private colleges that had mushroomed since 1997. At the end of 2004 there were more than 37 such institutions in the country. Another aspect that augurs very well indeed for the future is the number of female students. In the private institutions of higher learning more than 50 per cent of the students are women whereas in the institutions run by the state and the various regions, female enrolment is far below 20 per cent. This is indeed a revolution that the EPRDF government has wittingly or unwittingly unleashed in the country.

The main impetus for the rapid expansion of the education sector (from the primary to higher education) is the belief in the role of education in either the alleviation of poverty or poverty eradication and the flow of external financial assistance. The 1994 educational policy does not draw on close links between the provision of education and the alleviation of poverty. The aims of education as specified in the policy document are in fact modern in the sense that the needs and potential of the individual student are put in the centre.<sup>21</sup> It appears, rather, that the inspirational ideas on the role of education for the development of society (and hence for the

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21. Education and Training Policy, 1994.



reduction of poverty) came from donors. More specifically, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Policy, that the Ethiopian government was obliged to submit to the World Bank as a partial condition for continued loans and aid, lay behind the policy of rapid expansion. Another document that has provided a strong framework for the logic of rapid expansion is the United Nations Millennium Development Goals where the International Community is committed to assisting poor nations to provide universal primary education to their citizens and reduce by half the number of people who live below the poverty line of one dollar per day.<sup>22</sup>

Even though the current government has succeeded very well in mobilising external funds for development (according to some sources Ethiopia receives external funds to the tune of two billion USD per year), most of the budget for the education sector has to come from internal sources. Parents have been partners in financing the education of their children, although the burden on some households is too heavy. However, as has always been the case the allocated budget is far too small to manage the education sector.

It is debatable whether the rise in gross enrolment that Ethiopia has experienced since 1991 is significantly different from the rate of increase of the earlier educational regimes, i.e. 1941–74 and 1975–1991. Table 1 indicates that there has been a predictable and uniform rate of expansion of the primary and secondary sectors since the 1960s. The major change is to be found in the field of higher education. Since 2000 the government has diverted a considerable amount of resources from the general education budget into higher education. Higher education, the World Bank study noted, takes up 20 per cent of the educational resources and benefits only 1.7 per cent of the cohort population.<sup>23</sup> Ethiopia has now a comparable number of university students as many nations in Europe about a century ago.<sup>24</sup>

I am indeed tempted to agree with the concluding statements of the World Bank that the current Ethiopian government can look back with justifiable pride on the progress achieved in the field of primary education but not for the same reasons.<sup>25</sup> The educational systems that functioned in Ethiopia until 1994 were not elitist. The rapid rise of gross enrolment in primary education hides a series of structural imbalances. Whereas enrolment in urban areas is nearly universal, it is only about 45 per cent among rural children. Moreover, 25 per cent of newly enrolled rural children drop out before making it to the next grade and nearly fifty per cent of them hardly stay in school for five years.<sup>26</sup> With the exception of Addis Ababa, completion rates

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22. United Nations Millennium Development Goals, 2000.

23. World Bank, 2004a:107–10.

24. World Bank, 2004a.

25. World Bank, 2004a:30–1. I quote: A decade after launching its 1994 new Education and Training Policy, Ethiopia's government can look back with justifiable pride on the progress achieved. The very rapid growth of primary education reflects a genuine commitment to transforming the country's historically elitist system into one that serves all of Ethiopia's children.

26. World Bank, 2004a:51.

are very low in the rest of the country. According to the data assembled by the World Bank, for the country as a whole, it is only about 30 per cent of the school age population who complete the first four years of primary education. And about 20 per cent complete eight years of schooling.<sup>27</sup> In spite of the continuous polemic, the current government has done very little to expand and consolidate primary education in the rural areas. Rural Ethiopia is still short-changed. Urban children irrespective of their economic status have a far greater chance of completing primary education than rural children. The disparity in schooling is much wider between children in urban and rural areas than between boys and girls or even between rich and poor.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the urban/rural divide is far more decisive for the educational destiny of children than gender and class.

The most important contribution of this federal government is that it opened up education to private providers, a move that has proved to be extremely successful. Higher education in Ethiopia is no longer the monopoly of the state. The private sector has made its presence felt by capturing more than 25 per cent of all enrolments. What is even more remarkable is that more than fifty per cent of those enrolled in private institutions of higher learning are women. In public universities enrolment is heavily skewed in favour of male students. Although there are more women in diploma programmes (up to 20 per cent) their number decreases drastically in degree programmes. In 2002/3 there were 1915 students enrolled in post-graduate (Master of Arts and Master of Science) out of whom 135 were female students. Yet I believe that this government, compared with its predecessors, can indeed look back with justifiable pride for creating conditions for the economically well off households to finance the education of their children.<sup>29</sup> The implications of institutionalising private education are difficult to predict but could well be very negative on the political evolution of the society. Polarisation of the society may be one such negative effect. However, some of the negative effects could probably be offset by a comparable investment in the public institutions of higher learning accessible to disadvantaged groups in the society. It remains to be seen how the government will manage the emerging effects of such, for states like Ethiopia, a revolutionary decision.

Taken as a whole, however, the Ethiopian education sector is on the brink of collapse. The rapid expansion of primary education was achieved at a heavy price. According to the World Bank study that was conducted in 2004, the Ethiopian education sector has signs of distress. A key indicator of this distress is the deterioration of pedagogical conditions as exemplified in the pupil-section ratio and in the real spending per student.<sup>30</sup> In 2001–02, Ethiopia's pupil-teacher ratios of 65:1 in primary

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27. World Bank, 2004a:106.

28. World Bank, 2004a:105.

29. Allowing or encouraging the establishment and proliferation of private schools is bound to affect the aim of education as either a public or an essentially private benefit.

30. World Bank, 2004a.

education and 52:1 in secondary education were among the highest in the world. Pupil-section sizes have also risen to become extremely high averaging about 75 and 82 students per section. What the World Bank diplomatically describes as distress of the Ethiopian education system I believe ought to be described as a system on the brink of collapse. The World Bank study raises the right questions. These are: Does universal primary education mean getting all children to complete eight years of primary education? Does producing skilled workers mean turning out as many graduates as the education system can put through the upper levels of the system?

By using experiences from other comparable countries the World Bank study appeared to argue that five years of primary education is enough to achieve permanent literacy. Moreover, the World Bank study argued that Ethiopia would not be able to provide a universal primary education of eight years duration even if it were to increase its budget up to 4.5 per cent of GDP. An achievement study commissioned by USAID among fourth and eighth graders showed the average percentage of correct answers for all subjects (they were tested in Reading, English, Mathematics and Environmental Sciences) was 48 per cent among fourth graders and 41 per cent among eighth graders.<sup>31</sup> In 2001–02 in the Oromiya region eighth grade students who sat for the regional examination managed to get 33 per cent of the questions right.<sup>32</sup>

### Lessons learnt and missed

Although it might prove difficult to fully answer it, it is I believe worthwhile to raise the question as to whether this government could have learnt some lessons from the experiences of the previous governments. The crisis of the education sector has always been closely related to supply and demand. The education sector functioned well when graduates could find ready employment. The quality of education in terms of relevance to the cultural, historical and economic needs of the country was not given sufficient consideration as long as returns to investment in education (human capital) functioned well. The major crisis of the education sector of the Imperial system of governance dealt with problems of employment of secondary graduates. The 1971–72 education sector review was mainly concerned with controlling the flow of entrants to secondary education. The recommendations of the education sector review were far-sighted and, according to my judgement, very sound. The education policy that should have come into operation in 1973 was strenuously opposed by teachers and secondary students and was thus shelved when the Imperial system of governance itself was abolished.<sup>33</sup>

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31. World Bank, 2004:27.

32. Education in Ethiopia, 2004:147. The 33 per cent average refers to the average of the percentage of correct answers for eight subjects. This means for some subjects, such as English, the score might have been much lower.

33. The 1971–72 education sector review called for expansion of primary education in the rural areas and for the controlled growth of secondary and higher education. Teachers and students in Addis

The socialist regime inherited an education sector of a rather good quality that reached a smaller number of people. Moreover, it inherited an education system that produced more secondary school graduates than could be absorbed by the modern sector of the economy. The position of English as medium of instruction from grade 7 onwards was not in any way threatened. Up to 1973 up to 70 per cent of junior and senior secondary teachers were foreigners (mostly from the United States and some from India).

It appears as if the socialist regime did not even bother to read the background papers that the education sector review used for its assessment. The socialist regime introduced a new element, namely that of using education to inculcate ideological values. The educational policy of the Imperial system was hurriedly dismissed as “feudal and elitist”. Hence the secondary and primary sectors expanded at the rate of 12 and 15 per cent respectively. Whereas the expansion of the primary sector was probably in line with the ambitions of the Imperial policy, the continued expansion of the secondary education sector was the making of the socialist regime. Between 1976 and 1988 the country was annually producing about 70,000 secondary school graduates, few of whom could get employment in the urban/modern sector of the economy.

However, the aspect of education that worried the socialist regime was the decline of the quality of education measured by the level of proficiency of English as medium of instruction. By 1983, when the issue was finally given official recognition, nearly all foreign teachers had left Ethiopia. The teaching of English as a foreign language and using English as medium of instruction was left to Ethiopian teachers to manage the best they could. It is possible to argue that Ethiopian teachers, products as they were of the Imperial system of schooling, might have managed the situation had it not been for the serious deterioration of the teaching/learning conditions brought about by overcrowding of classes and subjects. The national and international expertise advised the socialist regime to continue to expand the universal primary education of eight years and secondary education. The same expertise further advised the infusion of resources to reduce the extremely high pupil-teacher ratio as it had a direct bearing on learning. Furthermore, the expertise doubted the wisdom of using English as medium of instruction in junior secondary schools (grades 7 and 8) and advised a comprehensive review of the matter.

The socialist regime did very little with the advice it solicited. Its priorities shifted to defending itself from insurgents who were conquering more terrain especially after 1988. The socialist regime was eventually defeated and the mantle of state power was captured by a coalition of armed insurgents with an entirely different agenda on the role of education.

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Ababa and other towns opposed the recommendations of the sector review, partly because they considered the education policy as part of the Imperial system that they wanted to change.

The federal system of governance virtually dismantled the structures that the earlier systems had painstakingly built up. To start with education became the affair of the regions; hence the authorisation of the use of local languages for primary education up to grade 6. Second, the federal government made it clear that it would henceforth concentrate on primary and junior secondary education up to grade 10. Right at the outset, the federal state heeding the advice of the World Bank announced that it would introduce cost sharing from senior secondary education upwards.<sup>34</sup> The regionalisation of education and the early advantaged position given to primary education led on the one hand to the growth of gross enrolment in primary and higher education. Ironically enough, it is the higher education sector that has taken the lion's share both in terms of enrolment and costs.<sup>35</sup> Gross primary and secondary enrolment did rise but not dramatically as claimed by the World Bank studies and the federal regime as can be seen from Table 1. Enrolment grew after the early 1960s at a rather uniform rate of about 12 per cent. But what is however different during the federal regime is the decline of the quality of education due to the steep rise in pupil-teacher and pupil-section ratios. It is now a common feature for instance of a chemistry or history section at any public secondary school in Ethiopia to have between 75 and 85 students. Sections of up to 100 students each are by no means rare. It is also a common feature for a secondary school teacher (for instance a teacher of history) to be responsible for eight sections with an average total of about 1,000 students.

One of the consequences of the unplanned and underfinanced expansion of the sector was a marked decline in the quality of education. The meaning put into the decline of the quality of education varies depending on the user. For teachers and concerned parents, decline of quality was measured by the inability of students to read texts. The government is repeatedly accused of pursuing the policy of ridiculing teachers' concern about decline of quality. The government reasoned that the expansion of the education sector was by itself a qualitative input. The World Bank on the other hand describes the decline of quality in terms of the worsening of pedagogical conditions.

Analysis of the decline of the quality of education at the primary level of education (the first eight years of schooling) generally deals with the capacity of the sector to provide permanent literacy to as many students as possible. Here the focus is on the rural/urban divide. Most of the urban children tend to complete six years of schooling, whereas, in the rural areas the rate of completion is at the most 30 per cent. Huge classes (of up to 100 students per section) and the distances that students

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34. The idea of cost sharing, first announced in 1994, became operative in 2003 both for college and secondary school students. See, World Bank, 2004b.

35. World Bank, 2004a:82. Ethiopia spends more than one hundred times as much per student in higher education as on a people in grades 1–4.

have to travel to go to school appear to be the main reasons for poor rate of completion.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, the federal government has in actual fact not invested enough in infrastructure and teachers. The combination of too few teachers and too few classrooms has led, according to the World Bank study, to a serious deterioration of pedagogical conditions. The most recent study on Ethiopian education to which I have already referred several times, views the problem from the perspectives of the economics of education. And hence the study proposes that the recruitment of unqualified teachers and the introduction of cheap construction materials would free sufficient funds to be used to reduce the dangerously high pupil-teacher and pupil-section ratios.

The World Bank study argues that the standards for teacher recruitment and school construction do not take into account budget constraints. In Ethiopia, as the standards for teacher recruitment and school construction exceed budget constraints, they have been achieved through cutbacks elsewhere that eventually compromise the ability to provide effective services. That this has indeed happened in the Ethiopian system can be seen from the following features: (a) a severe shortage of teachers and classrooms throughout the system leading to very high pupil-teacher ratios (among the highest in the world) and section sizes; (b) a sizable share of schools with very large enrolments; (c) large share of teachers in grade 5–8 and 9–12 who do not meet the certification standards; and (d) very limited spending on school administration and non-salary pedagogical resources.<sup>36</sup>

This excellent study, it has to be noted, has its limitations. Carried out by a panel of economists, it provides many issues for policy development on how to make the education system function in a cost effective manner. The World Bank study deals mainly with how the system functions, other equally important issues for policy development such as language of instruction, the linkages between primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the system are best left to national governments to decide. The major concern of the World Bank study is to gauge the distance covered by Ethiopia towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015. The World Bank noted that standards of teacher recruitment and school construction are so high that these two structural properties put effective constraints on the sector. Hence the World Bank lends support to some practices applied by regional states where non-qualified teachers are recruited to meet teacher shortages. The World Bank study also supports alternative school designs that cost a fraction of the school construction standard set by the Ministry of Education.

The World Bank study hypothesises that access and learning outcomes would ideally improve without putting heavy emphasis on the public purse. What is required, the study argues, is the adaptation of teacher recruitment and school con-

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36. World Bank, 2004a:151.

struction standards to local realities in order to avoid inevitable deterioration of the poor conditions in schools (high and rising pupil-teacher ratios, overcrowded classrooms and schools and a dearth of instructional materials). This according to me is a false hope. The gains that could be made through the massive recruitment of “para-professionals” and the reduction of construction costs could hardly be of such magnitude that they could lead to a significant reduction of pupil-teacher and pupil-section ratios. The same goes for the synergic effects of the policy of decentralisation as a promising development. But it is important to take into account that the improvement of the education system’s performance via decentralisation would require, among other things, changes that give parents and communities a real say in how schools are run, increasing accountability at all levels in the system, and providing appropriate information flows to give concrete meaning to the concept of accountability.<sup>37</sup>

If implemented the proposals put forward by the World Bank could perhaps for a short while lead to a reduction of pupil-teacher and pupil-section ratios. The proposals that affect recruitment where the principle of equal pay for equal work has not yet made an inroad would certainly be eventually regretted by the unqualified teachers who would be asked to survive on less than half of the salary of their counterparts who had passed through the institutes of teacher training. The additional proposal that there is room for the government to save money by narrowing the income per capita gap between the salary of a teacher and the income of an average Ethiopian farmer would in effect mean the reduction of teachers’ salaries. It is doubtful whether the federal system of governance would go so far as to antagonise such an influential group as teachers.<sup>38</sup>

There are two lessons this federal government could draw from the experiences of the earlier educational systems. The first is the tendency of the education system to produce graduates that cannot be absorbed by the economy. Policy makers of the Imperial regime were, in fact, aware of this problem and tried to deal with it. The educational praxis of the socialist regime continued to pour out secondary graduates into an essentially stagnant economy. Most of the secondary graduates continued to be unemployed and we do not know the extent to which this collective mass of educated but unemployed and unemployable youth might have undermined the legitimacy of the socialist regime to rule.<sup>39</sup> The socialist regime, it appears, tried to

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37. World Bank, 2004a:160.

38. It is worthwhile to note that the World Bank proposal is quite well known at least in the Amhara region. Teachers at Debre Sina (northern Shoa) informed me that they have been told by the regional education bureau that each one of them is earning ten times the salary of an Ethiopian peasant. The hidden threat of salary reduction is too visible.

39. It is difficult to establish a cause and effect relationship between high unemployment and the political stability of a regime. There are a number of studies showing the role of university and secondary school students in the downfall of the Imperial system. See, Balsvik, 1985; Markakis, 1987; Kebede, 1999. I argued in an earlier study (Negash, 1990) that an educational system that



**Table 2. Structure of the education system and medium of instruction**

| Education policy regime | primary    | Medium of instruction | Junior secondary | Medium of instruction |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1963–75                 | Grades 1–6 | Amharic               | Grades 7–8       | English               |
| 1974–94                 | Grades 1–6 | Amharic               | Grades 7–8       | English               |
| Since 1994              | Grades 1–6 | Mother tongue         | Grades 7–8       | English               |

Source: Negash, 1990; 1996.

limit the damage by a firm commitment to providing employment for all those who managed to get a diploma or a degree from the institutions of higher learning.

The second lesson that the federal regime should really consider is the relevance of English as medium of instruction. The regionalisation of education and the widespread use of regional languages for primary education could have diverted the attention of the government at least during the first few years after its coming to power from appreciating the problems associated with the use of English. More than ten years later, the federal government either refuses to review earlier experience, or is completely unaware of the negative impact of the use of English as medium of instruction.

### The curse of English as medium of instruction

An issue that the World Bank study did not in any way mention is the state of English as medium of instruction. The fact that the use of English as medium of instruction from grade 7 upwards was a problem both for students and teachers was noticed as early as 1983. The federal state did very little to confront the decline of the quality of education, mainly arising from the lack of proficiency in English among Ethiopian teachers. Anecdotal accounts tell about the arrogance of government officials treating quality as an elitist issue. The government loudly told its critics far and wide that it was busy expanding primary education with the implication that quantity would soon take care of issues/aspects of quality.

The pressure on the government to deal with the issue of quality of education in general and the quality of English as medium of instruction came not only from people outside the state such as parents, academics, journalists, but even more so from the teachers as well as the regional education bureaus. For instance, since 2003 the regional states of Oromiya and Tigray have used only Oromiffa and Tigrinya respectively as mediums of instruction in grades 7 and 8. Textbooks for junior secondary schools (grades 7 and 8) are still written in English but subjects are taught in the regional languages. The reasons appear to be clear and simple. The teachers working

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produces unemployable youth could either lead to rebellion or to the increasing growth of authoritarian rule. However, the argument was not empirically substantiated.



in these regions lack proficiency to teach in English. Both teachers and students found themselves in a classic vicious circle. The students could not follow their studies in English because their knowledge of English was poor and the teachers could not help their students since they themselves were not good at it.

The nature of the decline in the quality of education that prevails at secondary schools mainly concerns the capacity of students to follow their lessons in English. The education policy of 1994 and the subsequent growth of the use of vernaculars for instruction further weakened the position and status of English among teachers and students. Officially English is the medium of instruction from grade 7. But in reality in many parts of the country subjects are taught in the vernacular both in grades 7 and 8.

In the study that I wrote in 1990 I expressed my surprise as to why the Ethiopian governments did not make use of the country's rich tradition in literacy and develop the Amharic language to be used in secondary education.<sup>40</sup> The position of English as medium of instruction was further affected by the modest expansion of the secondary school sector. In a period of ten years the number of secondary school students increased from ca. 450,000 to 620,000. The impact of such expansion was that few teachers teaching at the secondary schools are qualified to teach in English.

Fully cognisant of this precarious situation the government resolved to introduce televised teaching as a solution. Hence since the beginning of October 2004 Ethiopian secondary school students follow their lessons via satellite dish. The programme commonly known as education by plasma is beamed from South Africa. The 491 secondary schools in the country are equipped with satellite dishes. Television (plasma) screens are installed in each and every class. The following subjects are taught by plasma: Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, English, Biology, and Civics. The teachers were no longer required to lecture or even explain in English.

Although it is too early to assess the impact of plasma education the evidence that can be gleaned from teachers and students is sufficient enough to hazard some remarks.

- The lectures though based on the Ethiopian curriculum are read too fast so that students have no chance of listening and making notes at the same time.
- A lecture is beamed only once and is not repeated or repeatable. Students who miss a lecture due to illness or some other causes have no way of listening to the lecture.
- The lectures in biology and chemistry are so poorly organised that they do not exploit the virtual reality potential of the medium.
- Most of the lectures (with some exceptions) are read by people who are not themselves subject teachers.

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40. Negash, 1990:54.

- Plasma education is highly dependent on an uninterrupted flow of electric power. Power cuts throughout the country are so common that entire lectures are lost for ever. Power supply, quite precarious in semi-rural Ethiopia, is not entirely reliable even in Addis Ababa, the capital of the African Union. (There were several, although brief, power cuts on Addis Ababa during my visit at Menelik Secondary School in October 28 and 29, 2004. Mekelle and the whole of Tigray and northern Wollo had a three day power cut in early November of 2004.)
- Student and teachers' guides are available on CD-ROMS. Student guides contain the entire lecture with all the questions and assignments. In addition to the lectures, teachers' guides contain answers as well. But printing and distributing student guides would involve the installation of thousands of copiers and the supply of millions of Xerox papers. Neither the funds to buy paper and machinery nor the technology to run and repair the latter are available at the schools.
- Secondary school students have great difficulties to read, write and above all to listen to spoken English. There are no studies showing the level of proficiency of English among secondary school students. However the sample survey that I undertook indicates strongly that the proficiency is extremely low.
- A typical plasma education teaching room contains about 90 students (for grades 9 and 10) with very little ventilation. Teachers describe the teaching and learning environment especially for students who attend the afternoon shift as quite discouraging.
- Student dissatisfaction appears to gain momentum day by day as many students find it more and more difficult to follow their studies. It is most likely that this dissatisfaction could be translated to widespread acts of sabotage as a way of getting back at the teachers.
- According to several teachers that I talked to, it would have been better if plasma had not been introduced.
- Experience with plasma education will undoubtedly grow but it is highly unlikely that this experience will be positive.

The problem with English as medium of instruction is even more complex. English is not only a language but it is a value system. Attending all classes in English is tantamount to the wholesale adaptation of the culture that the English language represents at the price of one's native language and the values that such language contains. Moreover, the replacement of the teacher by a televised lecture is taking place in a context where the role of the teacher is being continuously eroded. Ethiopian teachers are told via regular seminars and the media that they have to implement the new pedagogy the prime features of which are: student centred learning; self-contained classes during the first four years of primary schooling; and automatic

promotion during the first four years of primary education. In fairness, secondary school students are also told that they have to do two thirds of the learning themselves and can only expect the rest from their teachers. I do not see how English as medium of instruction can be firmly established (with or without plasma) as long as that the great majority of the Ethiopian people are so poor that annual per capita consumption of paper is not more than a couple of hundred grams. Even those who are well off do not have access to the language in such a way that it would enable them to make good use of it. The only exceptions are of course, the handful of students who attend British and American schools in Addis Ababa.

## II. Expansion, crisis and collapse

It can be maintained that the federal government paid far too little attention to a series of questions that touch on the complex links between education and civil society. How is the expansion of primary education linked to the alleviation of poverty strategy of the government? What kind of primary education can and does play a positive role against poverty? How is poverty alleviation strategy linked to education? Does the Ministry of Education have the expertise to link education to the alleviation or eradication of poverty? What are the roles of other departments, e.g. the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Capacity Building etc. in the education of Ethiopians? How is education linked to the strategic and long-term interests of the country? I shall attempt to answer some of these questions in part three. But in this section I find it worthwhile to recapitulate the main causes of the crisis of Ethiopian education, namely the uncontrolled expansion of the education sector and the use of English as medium of instruction.

The first and most fundamental cause for the decline of the quality of education is the uncontrolled expansion of the sector in relation to available material resources and job opportunities. The education sector was already in crisis in the early 1970s when up to 25 per cent of the secondary school graduates ran the risk of being permanently unemployed. The problem was realised and the Imperial regime did attempt to redress the balance through a controlled expansion of secondary education. The government sought to limit expansion of secondary education to the absorption capacity of the economy. Moreover, the government had the ambition of reallocating more resources to the expansion of primary education in the rural areas. Even though the education sector review of 1971–2 was by and large an Ethiopian product (there was more international expertise than Ethiopians but it appears that its recommendations was more in tune with the reality of the country), it was an exclusive product of an expert group. Neither teachers nor parents were in any organised manner involved. The final product was communicated as a policy to be implemented. This was, in fact, a very wise policy but unfortunately it was not implemented. It was defeated by combined protests from secondary school students, their parents and teachers. Most of these protestors were urban dwellers who could see very well that any policy that aimed at limiting access to secondary education had to be carried out at their expense. Coming as it did in the aftermath of the 1968 worldwide student revolts, where the Ethiopian student movement through its European and American branches made up an integral part, the education sector

review was readily perceived as an instrument of a “feudal” and archaic regime and thus easily defeated.

During the Imperial period, the crisis caused by the expansion of the secondary sector, it has to be noted, did not affect the quality of education as measured by pupil-teacher and section-teacher ratios so much. The crisis referred to the problem of employment of secondary school graduates. The regime that replaced the Imperial system showed little interest in the issues raised by the education sector review, partly due to the support it got from students, teachers and urban dwellers. The absorption capacity of the modern economy declined rather than increased during the military/socialist regime (1974–91), while the pace of expansion of secondary school education continued at the same rate as before which was in the range of 12 per cent per annum. Some of the secondary school graduates were either absorbed by the public sector (including the Ministry of Defence) or forced to leave the country due to the growth of ethno-nationalism.<sup>41</sup>

By around 1990, the uncontrolled expansion of the secondary school sector began to impact on the quality of education. While student numbers continued to rise every year, there was no comparable increase in either infrastructure or recurrent expenses. The shift system became the rule rather than the exception. The shortage of classrooms became even more acute and section sizes of up to 120 students per section were common. Moreover, there was a dramatic rise in school subjects thus further exacerbating the shortage of classrooms. Full time students spent less than three hours per day in school. The capacity of students to follow their studies in English declined continuously throughout the 1980s. The military/socialist regime was from the mid-1980s onwards more interested in preserving itself from militant contestants rather than in advancing educational policies relevant for the country and useful for students. The military/socialist regime, defeated by ethno-nationalist armed movements in 1991, left behind it an educational system in deep crisis.

The regime came that to power in 1991, has reorganised the country into a federation on the basis of ethnicity and language. It issued an education policy in 1994 with the expressed aim of resolving the crisis that it inherited from the earlier regimes. It redefined the objectives of education and reorganised the provisioning of secondary education, in form however rather than in content. The wide scale decentralisation that accompanied the implementation of the federal constitution placed the responsibility of primary education on federal states whereas secondary education remained the responsibility of the federal government.<sup>42</sup>

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41. The Ethiopian diaspora, in Africa and the Western hemisphere estimated to be around half a million took place during the 1970s and 80s due to the war between the central government and regional/ethno-national liberation movements. Thousands of Ethiopians were encouraged to leave their country by the Reagan administration as a form of punishing the socialist regime in Ethiopia.

42. Plans are under way to entrust federal states with the responsibility of running secondary schools and even colleges.

As far as the present Ethiopian federal government is concerned the major problem with the education sector is that it did not expand fast enough. Earlier regimes were accused of either not doing enough (elitism in the case of the Imperial regime) or of trying to use education for ideological goals (the military regime). In the middle of the 1990s, the government had the ambition of achieving 50 per cent net enrolment by 2015. This was considered a very high and rather unrealistic goal given the fact that as early as 1996 net enrolment was slightly over 20 per cent. Then came the UN Millennium Development Goals with their intention, rather than programme, of assisting countries to expand their education outreach so as to offer universal primary education by 2015. The Ethiopian government quickly subscribed to the fulfilment of the UN Development Goals and since the year 2000 it has revised its strategic documents. The race for the provisioning of universal primary education is according to government prognoses going very well. However, the most recent World Bank study has amply demonstrated that the price of rapid expansion has been the serious decline of the quality of education. Trained and instructed to measure its words, the World Bank describes the crisis of the Ethiopian education sector in terms of stress and worsening pedagogical conditions. The World Bank study questions the wisdom of rapid expansion under unacceptable pedagogical conditions and whether the country could in a meaningful way achieve universal primary education by 2015. These assessments are not new. For instance I have argued both in 1990 as well as in 1996 on the importance of matching expansion with resources and job availabilities as one of the effective ways of dealing with the crisis that, otherwise, is certainly to emerge due to expansion. What is remarkable is that the World Bank has finally caught up the critical voices.

It is to be hoped that the federal government will read the findings of the World Bank in a strategic way and proceed to strengthen the quality of education by matching enrolment to available funds. But I am afraid that the federal government will pick up the options suggested by the said study to further weaken the position and commitment of teachers by the recruitment of unqualified labour as well as by cutting down the salaries of qualified teachers.<sup>43</sup>

The second fundamental cause for the crisis of education is the use of English as medium of instruction. If the policy of rapid expansion of education has a negative impact on the quality of education, the continued use of English as medium of instruction has, according to my assessment, led the education sector to the brink

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43. World Bank, August 2004a. As a document produced by economists of education, the study noted that the education system could in the short term fill the shortage of qualified teachers by the recruitment of secondary school graduates whose salaries are half as much as of qualified teachers. The study noted that this was already practised in the rural areas in the Amhara and Oromiya region. Further the study pointed out that the salary of an average Ethiopian teacher is ten times as high as the per capita income of an ordinary Ethiopian. This ratio is higher in Ethiopia than in any other developing country. It is unfortunate that the government of the Amhara regional state has already begun to warn the teachers about their privileged position in society.

of collapse. The adoption of English as medium of instruction without any prior design of its eventual replacement by Amharic and other local languages meant in actual fact the Westernization of the Ethiopian society but without the necessary financial and economic resources. The policy of Westernization implemented during the Imperial era was designed to build and strengthen the autocratic position of Emperor Haile Selassie. Rather than strengthening the survival capacity of the Imperial system, the educational policy, anchored as it was in the extensive use of English, further undermined the Imperial system. The students that the Emperor, in his capacity as Minister of Education, recruited and trained turned their backs on him as they found his system of governance in complete contrast with the Western models that their English textbooks provided them with. I am not in any way pushing the argument that the Imperial system was brought down to its knees solely by the campaigns of disgruntled university and college students who talked better English than Amharic. The point that I want to stress is that the education system that was authorised and sanctioned by the Imperial system was not in any way engaged in the modernization of the Ethiopian political culture.

On the contrary, Ethiopian student politics from the mid-1960s called for the complete overhaul of the Ethiopian political society and its total replacement along the maxims of revolutionary ideology. Indeed the 1960s was highly polarised where two different ideologies (East and West) were locked in combat for the conquest of the world. Both ideologies were variants of Westernization and went about their business with a great dose of self-righteousness. African countries like Ethiopia had no alternative other than to adopt either one of the two ideologies. It is in this context, in fact, that the widespread use of English in Ethiopian secondary and university education has to be scrutinised. Yet the fact remains that the revolutionary upheaval that swept the Imperial system away and what emerged afterwards in the form of a military/socialist system of governance has not in any way strengthened the survival capacity of the Ethiopian society. At least according to Messay Kebede's monumental philosophical discourse on the subject, the 1974 revolution was a symptom of the incapacity of the ruling elite (that definitely included the educated) to modernise through the renewal of those aspects of culture that had served the country well in the past.<sup>44</sup>

Messay Kebede, to whom I owe a great deal on the connection between cultural renewal and modernisation, is even more emphatic. Ethiopia failed to modernise because it chose to base its path on Westernization rather than on the renewal of its traditional ethos. Modernisation through Westernization is a project doomed to failure. Westernization understood as the complete replacement of tradition imported from the West could only create the loss of identity. Moreover, once implanted in foreign culture, Western models of modernization (such as a democratic

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44. Kebede, 1999.

system of governance) are no more than caricatures of the original. No country has modernised its culture and society by wholesale importation of Westernization. Messay Kebede argues that the only way out for countries like Ethiopia is to anchor modernization on the traditional values and beliefs of the Ethiopian people. I shall return to some of the issues in the last section of this paper.

The problem of the use of English in teaching and learning was first noted in 1980. This was about ten years after the repatriation of the American Peace Corps service in Ethiopia. Here it is relevant to note there was no mention of the problem of relevance that undoubtedly existed due to the use of the English language and imported curriculum that the use of English demanded or facilitated. The logic of the policy makers at the Ministry of Education appears to be based on the observation that teachers as well as students were having difficulties with the language. The use of Amharic in primary education up to grade eight was considered a possibility as well the use of other Ethiopian languages. The Ethiopian government was advised to create an Academy of Ethiopian Languages with the explicit purpose of developing Ethiopian languages. The problem in teaching and learning associated with the use of English was again reviewed in 1983. Here again, the education review committee while stressing the seriousness of the problem advised the institution of a language policy as well as the replacement of English by Amharic.

The military/socialist government apparently heeding the advice of its expert group did, in fact, establish Academy of Ethiopian languages in 1985. However, when I first carried out my field studies in 1988, English remained as the medium of instruction from grade seven upwards. Although the military/socialist regime was quite close to replacing English with Amharic in primary and secondary education, the experience accumulated during its reign was completely swept away by the regime that succeeded it. In fairness to the federal government, primary education (up to grade six) is now given in more than fifteen languages instead of as earlier only in Amharic. Certainly this is a great improvement although the replacement overnight of Amharic by other Ethiopian languages created a great deal of stress both for teachers and students. Anxious to consolidate the federal framework the government it appears was induced to see advantages rather than disadvantages with the use of English as medium of instruction in junior and secondary schools. The awareness of the problems of the use of English that slowly grew in the 1980s was completely pushed aside for other all encompassing goals. Apparently, the achievement of universal primary education before 2015 is by far more important than the replacement of English by Amharic and other national languages. This is indeed very unfortunate as the problems with the use of English have become even more pronounced.

How serious is the problem of English in Ethiopian schools? The decision to improve the proficiency of English through plasma teaching is in a way proof of the seriousness. However, as this is an empirical question we need to wait until we get



studies that deal with the extent of the problem. A recent PhD study on English reading skills in Ethiopian primary schools found out that, “students at the end of the second cycle of primary education can hardly read in English. Nevertheless, they are expected to continue their studies in English as English changes from a class subject to be the medium of instruction in secondary schools.”<sup>45</sup>

I am of the strong opinion the situation in the secondary schools is, if not worse, comparable to the findings of the above study. In October 2004, I delivered a small test to over sixty senior secondary students (those in grades 11 and 12) in several parts of the country to highlight the seriousness of the problem. The test was a small Amharic essay made up of ten sentences and the students were asked to translate it into English.<sup>46</sup> The students who took the test had all passed the national leaving exams and I have been told that these students would more or less be automatically admitted to university.<sup>47</sup> I am not qualified to grade the translations but I can state that virtually none of the students could translate the essay correctly. The students had great difficulties to translate the sentence that dealt with the elder brother who had been employed for the last three months. The sentence could have been translated in several ways but all the students who attempted to translate it got it wrong.

Veteran teachers from the well established secondary schools in Mekelle and Addis Ababa repeatedly confirmed to me that the proficiency in English, both among students and among teachers, is much worse now than what it was fifteen years ago when I first had the opportunity to observe it. I was further told that in Addis Ababa, those students who had done their primary and junior secondary education in the private schools are considerably better at English and other subjects. The number of such students might be considerable in the capital city as it is the site for the greatest majority of private schools that cater for the upper middle classes. At the national level, however, enrolment in private secondary schools (grades 9–12) remains quite marginal with a meagre share of two per cent out of total enrolment.

The use of televised lectures in the marked absence of readily accessible reading and audio material, and the highly erratic supply of electricity can only alienate students and teachers. The popular song/piece of poetry that was produced towards the end of January 2005, just three months after the introduction of plasma, is an excellent illustration of the dilemma. It is so symbolic and demonstrative that it is worth paraphrasing it at greater length. What follows is a liberal translation of most parts of the song. The song is the lament of a student.

*The student informs his father that he has not been able to follow his studies as transmitted to him via plasma. There is no way that he can catch up with his studies;*

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45. Ambatchew, 2003:249.

46. It was a short biography of a 16 year old boy who has two brothers and a sister. His elder brother found employment since three months ago. His younger brother and youngest sister go to school. His father is a civil servant and his mother a housewife.

47. World Bank, 2004b.

*plasma lessons are of a fast pace that he has no chance of doing physics, mathematics and calculus. The problems of learning are compounded by power failures. Hence he informs his father that he should not expect old-age maintenance support from his son as his son will not be able to get a job after completion of school. Unless he manages to become a teacher and enjoy an easy life by managing the remote control to the plasma lectures. This is unlikely however as the student in spite of trying to study is fully aware that he won't pass the tests.*<sup>48</sup>

There is no mistaking the federal government's awareness of the seriousness of the problem caused by the use of English in schools. Plasma education was conceived as a strategy that could kill two birds with one stone. The introduction of the technology was very expensive indeed with an estimated cost of up to 50 million US dollars. Plasma education was intended to provide teachers and students access to televised English. However, it is symptomatic of the way things are handled in Ethiopia that plasma education was introduced before any pilot study was ever undertaken on the feasibility of the project. I do not think the problems that students are experiencing now can be dismissed as of a temporary nature arising from the introduction of a new technology. According to the experience of students and teachers, confronting the problem of English as medium of instruction by way of plasma has exacerbated it. The problem is not with the appropriateness of the technology but with English as medium of instruction. Here lies I believe the fundamental problem of Ethiopian education policy today. I maintain that the most viable strategy for the reconstruction of Ethiopian education is the privileging of national languages as media of instruction for all levels of education including at the university level.

The overriding purpose of a national education system is the inculcation of social, cultural and political values designed to foster unity of vision among citizens. In Western countries, the media has more and more assumed the role of inculcating such values. During the last one hundred years national education systems have been reorganised to train citizens who can manage the growing bureaucratic machinery of the state. Modern demands on the state as a rational and impartial institution engaged in the development of the well-being of its citizens, impose high standards on the capacity of its employees. Moreover, the management of the social, economic and cultural resources of complex societies (such as Ethiopia with its over 80 different languages and strong and large ethnic regions with strong centrifugal tendencies) demands (rather than requires) a trained population of civil servants who are adequately prepared for their tasks. Moreover, a trained bureaucracy is not only expected to manage a society but to scale up development.<sup>49</sup>

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48. The song has several versions. I am grateful to Fantu Demssie for her comments on one of the early versions.

49. One of the conditions for scaling up is to be ready to recognise that there could be something to salvage from what has been attempted earlier.

The question that is, of course easier to put but more difficult to answer, is whether the Ethiopian society of today is in a better position to come to grips with the challenges of development? Put in another way is Ethiopia in a process of educating and training a competent pool of future bureaucrats in addition to all those who are good with their hands, i.e. with vocational training? It is difficult to answer these questions in a straightforward manner.<sup>50</sup> Partly because, we have to wait for a good number of years before we can pass judgement on the performance of the education system as regards the level of quality of the bureaucracy produced by the education system some time back in the past. Moreover, the general political environment under which bureaucrats work plays a great deal in either enhancing or paralysing their potential. An authoritarian structure such as the current Ethiopian system, at least according to some long time observers,<sup>51</sup> discourages civil servants from active participation as it has the tendency to punish initiative.

In spite of the fact that many African countries will for many years to come depend on Western development assistance, the responsibility for devising on appropriate development strategy ultimately rests on African societies, in our case on the Ethiopian polity.<sup>52</sup> The rhetoric of the Anthony Blair Commission on Africa notwithstanding, the commitment of the rich countries to help the least developed countries has never been as low as it is now.<sup>53</sup> Here it is worthwhile to make a small digression and stress this point. In 1968 the UN commissioned Lester Pearson to report on International Development, which he duly did in 1969. The main thrust of the Pearson Commission was that the setting in motion of a long-term and self-sustaining development among the developing nations was to the interest of all the citizens of the world. On the basis of such logic and the repeated campaigns from various quarters, the Pearson Commission recommended that the volume of development aid should be sufficient to help the less developed countries to a level of growth of at least six per cent per year.<sup>54</sup> Elaborating further the Pearson Commission argued that a growth of six per cent per year would transform the economic

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50. One can certainly argue that the current prime minister, Meles Zenawi is by far the most educated and Westernised leader that Ethiopia has had since the beginning of the 1900s. A product of the Imperial system, Meles Zenawi belongs to the last batch of an educated elite that will soon exit from the political and cultural arena.

51. Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003.

52. To a great extent relations between donors and the World Bank on the one hand and the least developed countries on the other can be described by the saying: he who pays the piper calls the tune. For donors and the World Bank it will always be easy as well as tempting to advise Africa on its chequered development path. The more so if the development path chosen is the Western one. Neither will there be a shortage of reform and development packages for African states from the boardrooms of the World Bank and major donor nations. However, in the long run, the sustainability of development strategies will greatly depend on how closely these strategies are intertwined with the world views of their beneficiaries. See, Negash, 1996:27.

53. The Blair Commission on Africa is no more than a slight modification of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

54. Pearson, 1969:124.

outlook of any aid recipient country as this would imply that per capita income would increase four times in half a century. Such a growth rate brought about by foreign aid and favourable local environment could easily absorb rapid increase of the population.<sup>55</sup>

The report of the Pearson Commission was reviewed by a group of economists who met at Columbia University in 1971. The Columbia Conference, according to Hans Singer and Javed Ansari<sup>56</sup> stressed that, even if a six per cent growth rate was attained, the gap between the rich and the poor countries would be four times its present size by the year 2000. It was necessary for the whole attitude to the problem of international assistance to be fundamentally altered. The Columbia Conference argued that aid must be targeted to the income per capita in the recipient countries. Specifically, aid must not be less than 400 USD per person per annum in the least developed countries by the year 2000. Aid should be related to specific social targets (e.g. better nutrition for children, health standards, education levels, etc.) and must be concentrated to the group of countries which have a per capita income of less than 300 USD per annum. Commenting on the report of Lester B. Pearson and the Columbia Conference that reviewed the Pearson Commission, Hans Singer and Javed Ansari further wrote:

A primary objective of aid allocation policy must be the reduction of the ever-widening international gap. Aid must not be seen as a temporary self-liquidating, stop-gap measure. Instead, it must be frankly recognised that aid, as we know it, ought to be the first step that has been taken towards the evolution of a progressive international taxation structure based on the principle "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need". In other words, the fact must be faced that aid is a permanent feature of the process of international resource allocation. The extent to which it is distributed in accordance with the true principles of equity and efficiency reflects the contribution of the well-to-do members of the international community towards eliminating the imbalances and inequalities within the world economic system. Instead, international assistance that is given without regard to the relative needs of the recipients is self-defeating, in that its contribution to the development of the recipient country is highly unlikely to be very fruitful. The contribution of the rich economies towards the development requirements of the poor nations will thus have to be geared to the development needs of the latter and not to the interests, both political and economic, of the rich countries themselves.<sup>57</sup>

By the end of the 1980s the development debate that the Pearson Commission articulated was for all intents and purposes forgotten. Since the 1980s the OECD countries have successively divested themselves of active engagement in the development of Africa accompanied by the continuous decline of official development aid

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55. Pearson, 1971:53.

56. Singer and Ansari, 1978:141–2.

57. Singer and Ansari, 1978:142–3.

to Africa south of the Sahara. In 1992 Africa got 18 billion US dollars. This figure declined since 1995. Aid to Africa is now in the range of 16 billion US dollars. The continent gets another 14 billion US dollars in the form of loans.

The document on UN Millennium Development Goals that was produced at the end of the last millennium cannot in any way be compared with the first UN Commission on the subject, discussed above as the Pearson Report. The objective of the UN Millennium Development Goals is not development but the reduction of the poor, defined as those who survive on less than one US dollar per day. Although the UN notes the existence of extreme inequality of income between rich and poor nations and that extreme poverty is an affront to common humanity, it fails utterly to develop a programme on how to combat global poverty. The reduction of the poor by half, which means a slight increase in the income of those who earn less than one dollar a day (so that they move to the next category of existence which is not deemed poverty by the currently used definition) is not a strategy that can lead to sustainability and eventual growth.

According to my view, the UN Millennium Development Goals is a tragic failure. The central problem is the poverty of its vision and hence of its commitment. In sharp contrast to the first UN Commission on Development (Pearson Commission), the UN Millennium Document on Development limits itself to a principle of intention of four points. First, the UN Millennium Document expresses the wish that poverty (those living on less than one USD per day) will be reduced by half by 2015. Second, it limits itself by reminding the rich countries that they have an indispensable role to play by further opening their markets, by providing deeper and faster debt relief, and by giving more and better-focused development assistance. Thirdly, it challenges the foremost experts in the field of agriculture to think through the barriers of low productivity in Africa. And finally, the Millennium Document leaves the task of the renewal of African agriculture to the philanthropic foundations [NGOs].

Each of the above four points is so vague that they are virtually impossible to implement and monitor. Let us for instance take the strategy on poverty reduction. What does the reduction of the number of the poor by half by 2015 mean? Does this mean the reduction by half of those 1.2 billion people who were poor in the year 2000? The population of the poor of the world is bound to nearly double in the coming fifteen years. So does the UN Millennium Document refer to the population at 2015 or at 2000? Even if we concede the UN Millennium Document does indeed refer to the population at 2015, there is no mention of strategies that need to be in place. The UN Millennium Document limits itself by reminding rich countries to open up their markets.

The UN Millennium Document is a betrayal of the poor. It has very little to say about the development needs of the poor regions of the world. Yet it is only the UN that has the mandate and the moral responsibility to lay down policies for a stable

and sustainable world. How far the UN has neglected its role in the evolution of an equitable international economic order becomes clear when two of its documents are put side by side. The 1969 commission report called for untied aid that would enable the recipient country to achieve an annual growth of six per cent, whereas the UN Millennium Development goals aspired to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than one US dollar per day by 2015.

The main thrust of the above digression is to emphasise once again that under present circumstances there is very little that Ethiopia can expect from the so called international donor community.<sup>58</sup> Ethiopia and the Ethiopians have to make it on their own. And the task of pulling the vast majority of Ethiopians (the daily income of 89 per cent of the population is below two USD) will, among other things require an educated ruling class (an educated group) that has high analytical capacity at system level and the capacity to plan and implement short and long term strategies in a sustainable manner. The educational system that will be entrusted to produce such elite ought to pay a high premium for relevance and quality. Only an educational system based on relevance and quality can counteract the risk of fragmentation of society and the consequent loss of political legitimacy and hopefully in the long run deter the perpetuation of the use of authoritarian power. So far, the Ethiopian education system is not paying a high premium for relevance and quality.

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58. Commission for Africa, 2005.

### III. Constructing a positive role for education in economic and social transformation

Whereas the Ethiopian educational landscape bears no resemblance to what it was in the late 1950s, the poverty landscape is all too recognisable. There are certainly several reasons why countries like Ethiopia appear to develop backwards. However, one thing is certain. The role of education in the alleviation of poverty has not been significant at all. And part of the reason, as I argued in part two above, is that Ethiopian education has been based on false premises. The table on enrolment demonstrates the dramatic changes of the landscape of Ethiopian education during the last fifty years. The poverty landscape has changed to the worse during the last fifty years. Although, the statistical material for impact assessment is not as reliable as school enrolment, there is a wide consensus that poverty has not only persisted but continued to grow. Ethiopia is poorer now than what it was fifty years ago. Ethiopia of today has an income of about 100 USD per head as it had more forty years ago. But the population has more than doubled during these years. Most of the studies on the state of poverty in Africa state in general terms that the majority of Africans are worse off now than what they were on the eve of independence.<sup>59</sup>

One can certainly argue that it is only through and by language that collective life and the world can be interpreted in an integrative manner. So I believe that the eventual replacement of English by Ethiopian languages is one of the factors that could strengthen the survival potential of the Ethiopian political community. In the 1970s the crucial role of culture and hence language for overcoming underdevelopment was put forward by leftist scholars who did not adhere to the main schools of Marxist political economy of development.<sup>60</sup> More recently, a powerful case has been put forward by Alamin Mazrui who associates the use of African languages with intellectual self-determination. Alamin Mazrui is of the opinion that the wider use of African languages could be the basis for an intellectual revolution.<sup>61</sup> Such a revolution I am tempted to add, if and when it happens, would have the goal of enhancing the survival of Ethiopian society and consequently several of its values.

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59. United Nations, 2000.

60. Cf. Negash, 1990.

61. Mazrui, 2003:94.



### Enhance the use of Ethiopian languages as media of instruction for university education

A recent study of great relevance is Messay Kebede's *Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia's enigmatic presence*. The central thesis of this philosophical discourse is that no country has modernised its culture and society by wholesale importation of Westernization. It also argues that the only way out for countries like Ethiopia is to anchor modernization in the traditional values and beliefs of the Ethiopian people. According to Messay Kebede the survival of Ethiopia as a political and cultural unit over a very long period of time was due to values and virtues of the traditional system of governance. And yet Ethiopia failed whereas countries that had comparable political systems such as Japan succeeded in modernising. The comparison with Japan, as the outstanding study of Bahru Zewde illustrated was an issue picked up by Ethiopian intellectuals from the 1890s until the 1930s.<sup>62</sup> Japan and Ethiopia were faced with the threat of colonialism. However, whereas Japan greatly due to its geography had to reorganise its human and material resources with the expressed intention of protecting itself from colonial intrusions, Ethiopia used the option of territorial expansion. The territorial expansion to the south of the country (where Ethiopia became three times as big as it was in the 1860s) provided the Ethiopian state with the resources it needed to purchase arms. Moreover the victory of Adwa (Italy and Ethiopia fought in 1896) validated the option.<sup>63</sup> Had it not been for the conquest and incorporation of the south, Ethiopia, in order to maintain its survival, would have been forced to modernise. That it did not was the first misfortune to which was later added the autocratic system of governance introduced by Haile Selassie that blocked the path of change and reform.

The whole tenor of the analysis is based on a counterfactual hypothesis which does not leave any room for unpredictable turns of events. Plausible as it might appear this hypothetical argumentation suffers a weakness in that it does not allow for other equally probable outcomes. If Ethiopia had been confined to its pre-1885 boundaries, it might have been defeated by the Italians or it could have reverted back to the anarchic state of political landscape that prevailed at the beginning of the 19th century. I find the flow of Messay's arguments slightly dogmatic in that he draws too much actuality out of a potential. In other words, Ethiopia, like Japan had the historical and cultural ingredients to modernise in order to preserve itself from colonialism and neo-colonial dependence. But this requires that the Ethiopian elite of the period were fully aware of the dangers of colonialism and the nature of its threat. How much the Ethiopians were aware is an empirical question that we shall never be able to discover the answer to. The victory against Italian Imperialism at Adwa in 1896 and Italy's readiness to recognise the independence of Ethiopia did

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62. Zewde, 2002.

63. Kebede, 1999:276–7.



certainly enhance the self-confidence of the Ethiopian system to ward off colonialism. The expansion of the Ethiopian state as an explanatory factor hindering the Ethiopian society and polity from modernising its values is an assumption that Messay Kebede has not attempted to substantiate empirically. I am afraid that such assumption cannot be substantiated. Ras Tefferi Mekonnen's (later crowned as Haile Selassie the First) visit to Europe in 1924 must have shown him the consequences of the gap between his Ethiopia and countries like Italy. Messay Kebede argues that by the 1920s it was already too late as the path of change and reform was definitely blocked. The main reason was no longer overconfidence, but a negative structural change due partly to the incorporation of the south, partly to the circumstances related to the rise of Haile Selassie and his policy of the modernisation of autocracy.

Thirty years after the downfall of the Imperial system and what followed later, the country has gone on to the bitter end of depersonalisation and subsequent failings by adopting a radical socialism. The Ethiopian experience is that of mistaking modernisation for Westernization, that is, a process whereby the borrowing of Western technology and rationality meant the progressive dissolution of the Ethiopian mentality.<sup>64</sup> Modernisation was conceptualised in terms of conflict between tradition and modernity, not in terms of modernity going in for the revival and enhancement of tradition.<sup>65</sup> Although the present as I understand it is the most difficult moment to grasp, Messay Kebede defines the current situation in Ethiopia in quite bleak terms. He writes that socialism and its colossal failures have inflicted serious wounds on the Ethiopian personality robbing them of their pride, and moreover, the mess that socialism has left behind appears to increase the dangers of an irreversible marginalisation and perhaps of disintegration.<sup>66</sup> *Survival and Modernization* is a huge book that deserves more commentary than what is appropriate in this essay.

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64. I fully concur with Messay Kebede's insightful comments on the role of revolutions on social changes. I quote: "Social change has resulted in greater adaptability every time it has succeeded in salvaging and enhancing the inner characters of the societies it has affected. The theory according to which class struggle is the mid-wife of a better society has never been verified. Instead, societies which were prudent enough to avoid revolutions by promoting evolutionary changes have best succeeded, while those torn by revolutionary upheavals were either swept away or prevented from making any further progress by their own internal contradictions" (1999:168).

65. Kebede, 1999:292.

66. Kebede, 1999:360. I do not share Messay Kebede's pessimism. Certainly Ethiopia faces the danger of being marginalised, and one can even argue that it is already a highly marginalised part of the world. But this process of marginalisation has a great deal to do with the geometric rate of growth of the Western world enhanced by the rapid growth of information and computer technology. Marginalisation may make the life of Ethiopians hard as well as short (in terms of stagnant or even decline in life expectancy and other health indicators), but will not necessarily lead to disintegration of the Ethiopian society. Ethiopian religiosity in general and the Orthodox Church in particular – the main pillar of nationalism – will I believe continue to play a unifying role. If the revival of the Christian faith among the youth is something to go by, then one can say that the values that the Orthodox Church embodies have functioned and will continue to function as a bulwark against secular/modern state ideologies that tend to deny the citizen any meaningful role. But survival and modernisation are not synonymous concepts.

Here below I shall highlight some of the salient points. A theory of modernization of Ethiopia, argues Messay Kebede,

must inquire into the ways and means by which a similar inner process of impersonalisation can evolve from the cultural instance. It must also detect which aspects of the traditional set up that favour or obstruct the process of modernisation, with the view of strengthening the positive elements while suppressing – more precisely, sublimating – the negative ones. The force and validity of this theory stem from its promise of an inner, self-induced process of change, unlike acculturation or Westernisation, whose failure originates with the imposition of an exogenous and unharmonious type of change.<sup>67</sup>

Hence in the light of the highly distressing experience of failure and depersonalisation, Messay Kebede argues that the only way to come out of this quagmire is through the construction of a theory of modernisation based on the motto, “Return to the Source”.<sup>68</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present and discuss Messay Kebede’s attempt to make concrete what this return to the source actually could involve. Here I shall point out the limitation of such an approach. The problem with such programmes as the return to the source (Messay Kebede) or doing politics in the way and manners we have never seen before (Basil Davidson: 1992) is that these do not fully appreciate the messiness and the complexity of the realities of daily life.

### Develop Amharic and Oromo as the major languages of instruction

With due respect to Amharic (as the undeclared official language) there are other languages as well that need to be considered. The choice of language within the context of a state is always political. In Ethiopia the role of the Oromo (or the Oromo question as it is sometimes called) has been greatly debated. In *Rethinking Education* (1996) I discussed the value of indigenous knowledge systems and their role in rural development. More than seventy per cent of the Ethiopian people are fluent in one of two languages, namely Amharic and Oromiffa. As an example I took the case of Oromo and concluded that the challenge facing Ethiopian education policy makers was to create conditions for the modernisation of the Oromo culture without the reproduction of its negative aspects.<sup>69</sup> Since then, the role of the Oromo in contemporary Ethiopian history has become even more pronounced with the growing pace of federalism. It is with pleasure that I quote Messay Kebede’s appraisal of the role of the Oromo in the modernisation of Ethiopia: “There is no way”, the author writes, “by which Ethiopia can change unless it shows greater openness to a revived Oromo

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67. Kebede, 1999:363.

68. Kebede, 1999:360.

69. Negash, 1996:33–4.

identity, for in so doing it will simply be evolving universalist values and methods of work. In sum, the problem of its modernization boils down to a genuine form of national integration. Only when the Oromo together with the other Ethiopian peoples knuckle down to the task of creating a new trans-ethnic, national identity, can impersonalization, so vital to modernization, take root" (p. 389).

The language policy as it currently operates in schools does not in any way contribute to the task that Messay Kebede outlined above. Quite on the contrary, the current language policy appears to produce citizens that will find it hard to communicate with each other. The fact that Amharic is taught in non-Amhara areas only as a subject is not sufficient to make Amharic a trans-ethnic media of communication. The unifying language is supposed to be English since it is the media of instruction all over the country from (officially) grade 7. The discussion on the state of English above, has hopefully shown that English would not and could not function as a unifying language in Ethiopia. Therefore, according to my way of thinking, the only way that the Oromo could "knuckle down to the task of creating a trans-ethnic national identity" is when the Oromo language is widely available to non-Oromo citizens of the country.

## Strengthen the educational process through transparency and inclusion

Education is only one of the variables needed in order to consolidate the development of any society. In most countries the educational system is organically linked to the economy and society concerned. The educational content changes in tandem with the changes taking place at the level of the economy and society. It is in developing countries where education and society appear not to meet. This I contend is due to the use of foreign languages as media of instruction. The use of foreign languages implies the absorption of values of the language in question. There is nothing wrong in encouraging as many Ethiopians as possible to study the English language as a way of connecting to the outside world. However, it is altogether a different matter to use English as medium of instruction for all subjects from grade 7 upwards.

It is of absolute importance that educational policies are anchored very well among all stakeholders. A common error committed by developmentalist states is a tendency to know all the answers to all the questions. The Ethiopian landscape was run by that ideology during the military/socialist regime that had power between 1974 and 1991. The situation since 1991 is much better as the policy of federalism inevitably deals with the decentralisation of power. Yet a great deal remains to be done in opening up major issues such as education to wide involvement of stakeholders.

One of the most important attitudinal changes that the government has to encourage is the recognition that the main function of the government is to implement policies that have been developed together with all stakeholders in an open and transparent environment. Indeed governments do initiate policies and then seek support for such policies among the electorate. But rarely do governments combine both powers. In the case of Ethiopia, the practice of developing policies on the basis of expert opinions ought to be expanded so as to include parents, students, civic organisations but above all the major religious institutions.<sup>70</sup>

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70. Cf. Negash, 1996:20–50.

## Concluding remarks

The Ethiopian society of today appears to exhibit considerable internal strength as well as strong divisive features. Freedom of the press appears to be in the process of leading to a strong civil society, while the politicisation of ethnicity bears with it a serious danger of political fragmentation that could lead to a debilitating civil war. Ethiopia is once again at a crossroads. In so far as modernization is closely linked to the capacity of a political entity for survival, the foundation for such a capacity could very well be the values that encourage and privilege self-confidence. In this context the education sector is crucial.

The realization that the Ethiopian state and society have to rely on themselves to find their place in this globalised world ought to create a series of conditions for taking a hard look at how to restructure the education sector. The decision to abandon English as medium of instruction could undoubtedly lead to a cultural revival which in turn is a precondition for the modernization of Ethiopian society.

The obstacles to learning created by English as medium of instruction have been recognised since the early 1980s. However the issue has neither been studied systematically nor fully debated. This discussion paper will have amply fulfilled its objective if it contributes to a process of public debate and sustained research on the role of Amharic and Oromiffa in the revitalisation of the Ethiopian education sector.

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